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# **A Comparison of Learning Skills Delivery Models:**

**Individual appointments,  
non-credit workshops and  
transitional success course**

**Sheilagh Grills  
Brandon University**



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# Brandon University

- Smaller university on the Canadian Prairies
  - Predominately liberal arts and sciences undergraduate institution
- Approximately 3600 students
- Average entering grade is 78-81% but classroom experience can be bimodal
  - Innovative programs with competitive entrance requirements
  - Open admissions policy for general arts and science degrees



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- Many of our students come to us with circumstances or backgrounds that would have made them unlikely to attempt or be successful at other institutions
  - Almost 1/3 are over 25 years old
  - More students are married (15%) than live in residence (13%)
  - Approximately 10% declare Aboriginal ancestry
- Working to improve retention
  - Average institutional rate of 64.9% students retained into second year
  - Many students intend to transfer or are taking pre-professional studies, but they count in our attrition figures



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# FY Learning Skills at BU

- No programs are mandatory
  - Students are not directed through a provisional admission category
- Students may choose to access Academic Skills through:
  - Individual appointments
  - Non-credit, no-cost workshops on specific academic skills
  - A transitional success or learning framework course, available as an elective towards degree requirements



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- Longitudinal comparison of these 3 models on measures of student success
  - 578 students who accessed Learning Skills tracked since their first year in 2005 or 2006
  - All Learning Skills services provided by the same person
  - Control group of introductory psychology students also tracked since their first year in 2005 or 2006



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# How to measure Success?

- Anecdotal evidence – The Individual's Story
- Exit interviews, satisfaction surveys, polls
- LASSI
  - Changes in reported knowledge of and use of learning strategies over continuing studies
- Graduation rates
- Retention or attrition rates
  - Credit hours attempted
- Grades
  - Changes in GPA over continuing studies
  - Cumulative GPA when left BU



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# Assessment

- Clear differences in institutional resources required for these 3 delivery models
- One goal of this inquiry was to resist the pendulum swings or fads that tend to drive retention initiatives
- “Supporting students as learners requires not just offering cognitive strategies and remedial programs and services, but also the application of policy and strategy to routine institutional operations in both academic programs and student life activities.”

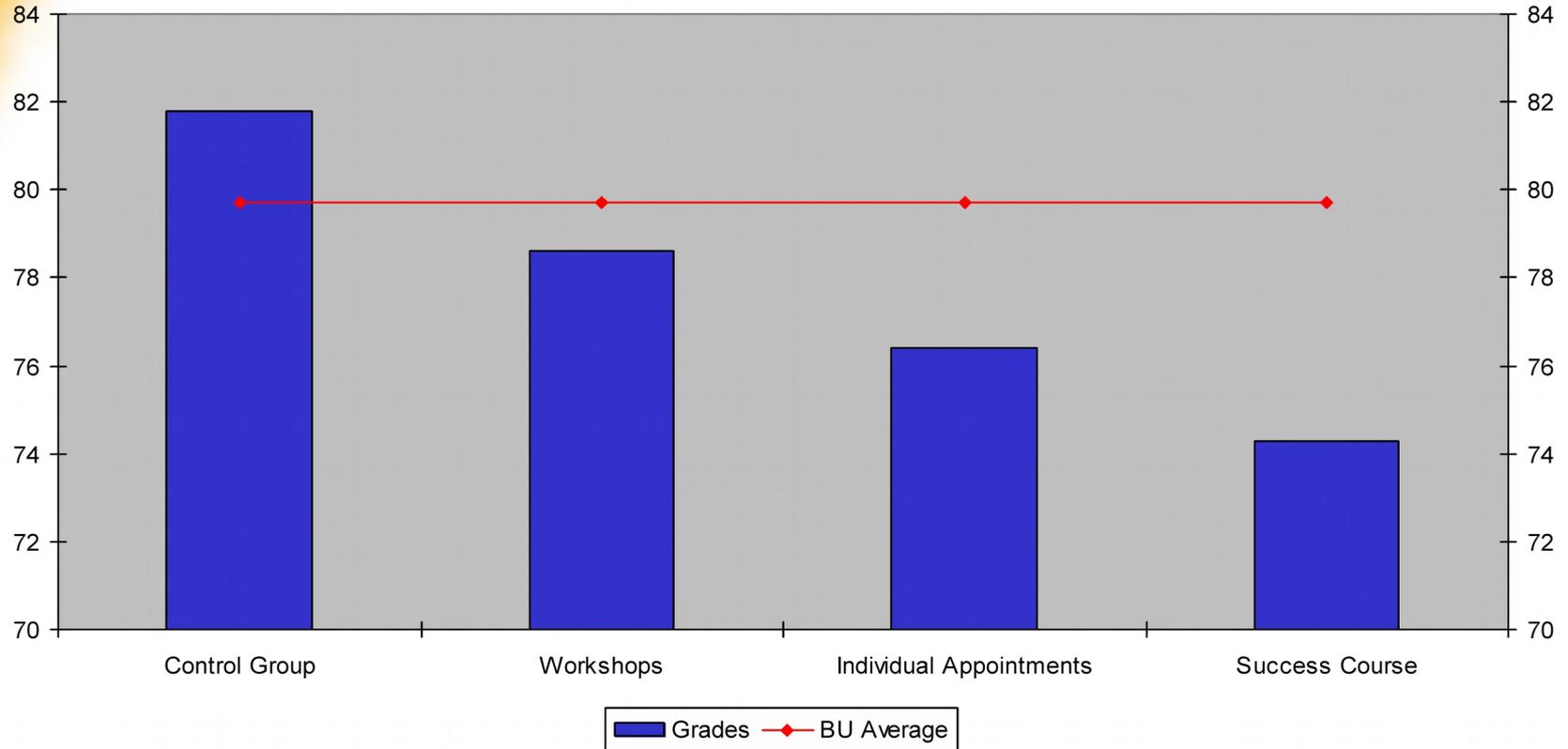
(Keeling, Wall, Underhile & Dungy 2008:59)



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# High School Grades





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# Individual Appointments

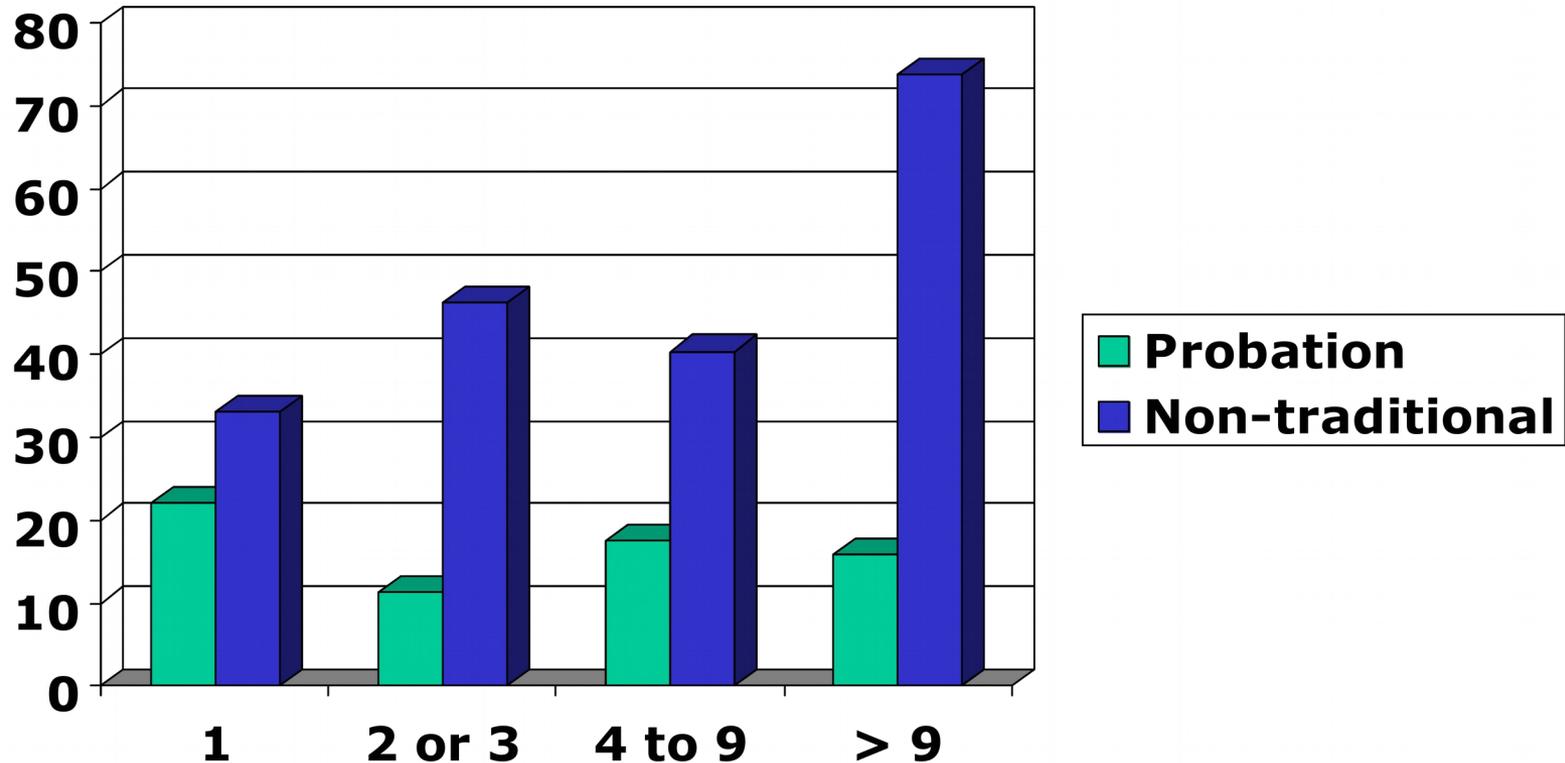
- Hour-long meetings to work on individual issues
- Increase in intake following workshops and first marks at midterm, but many start directly after orientation
- Wanted to examine differences in number of visits
  - Visual binning to look for trends in only 1 appointment, 2-3, 4-9, or >9 visits
  - No differences in High School averages by attendance
  - Interesting differences in terms of Status of student by attendance



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# Status by # of Appointments





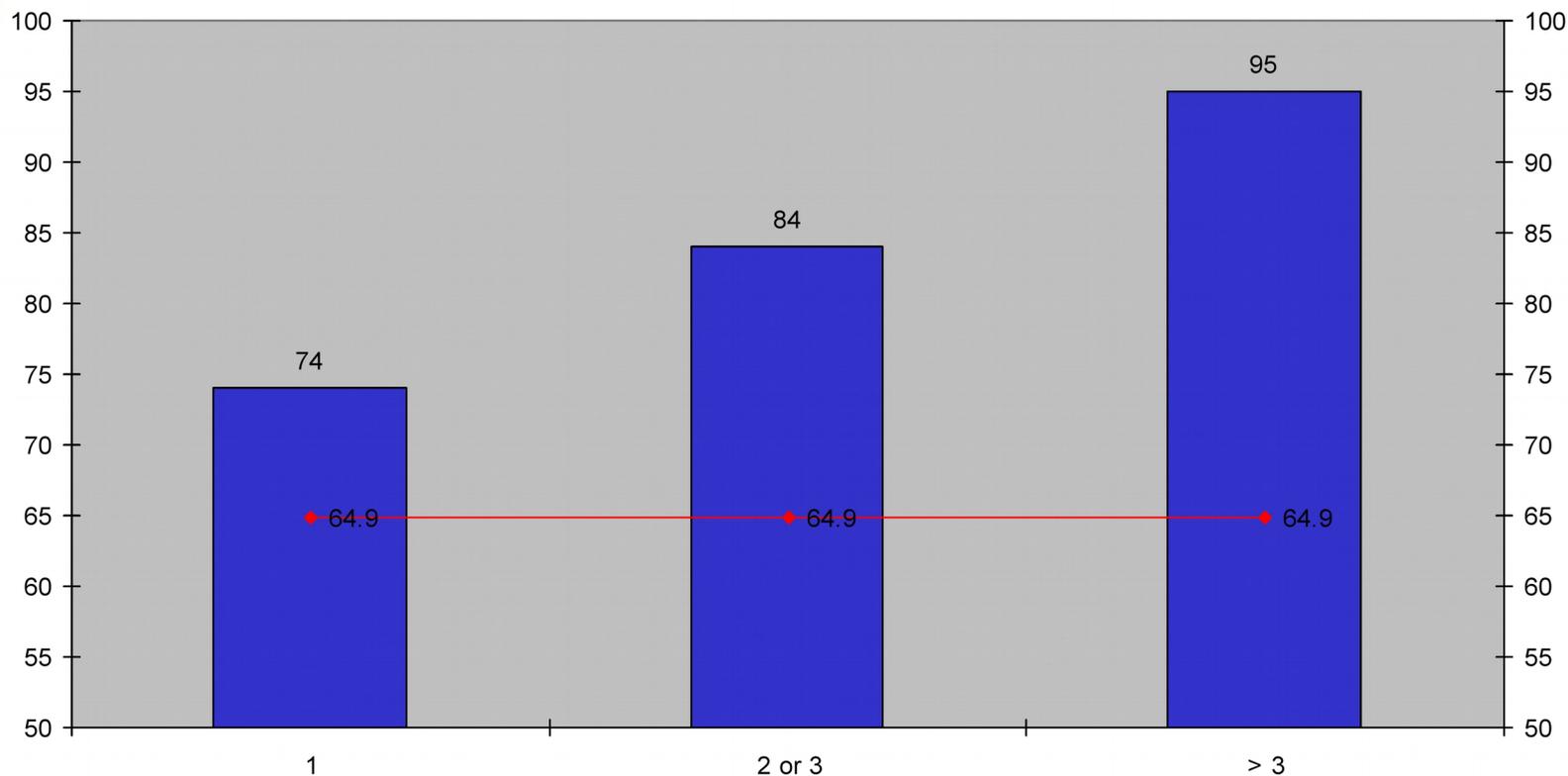
- I grouped the 4-9 and >9 visit categories together to make more equitable population groups of approximately 100
- Institutional 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention average is indicated on the following graph by the red line
  - Overall retention - 65%
  - 1 individual learning skills session – 74%
  - 2-3 individual sessions – 84%
  - >3 individual sessions – 95%



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# Retention by # Appointments





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# Workshops

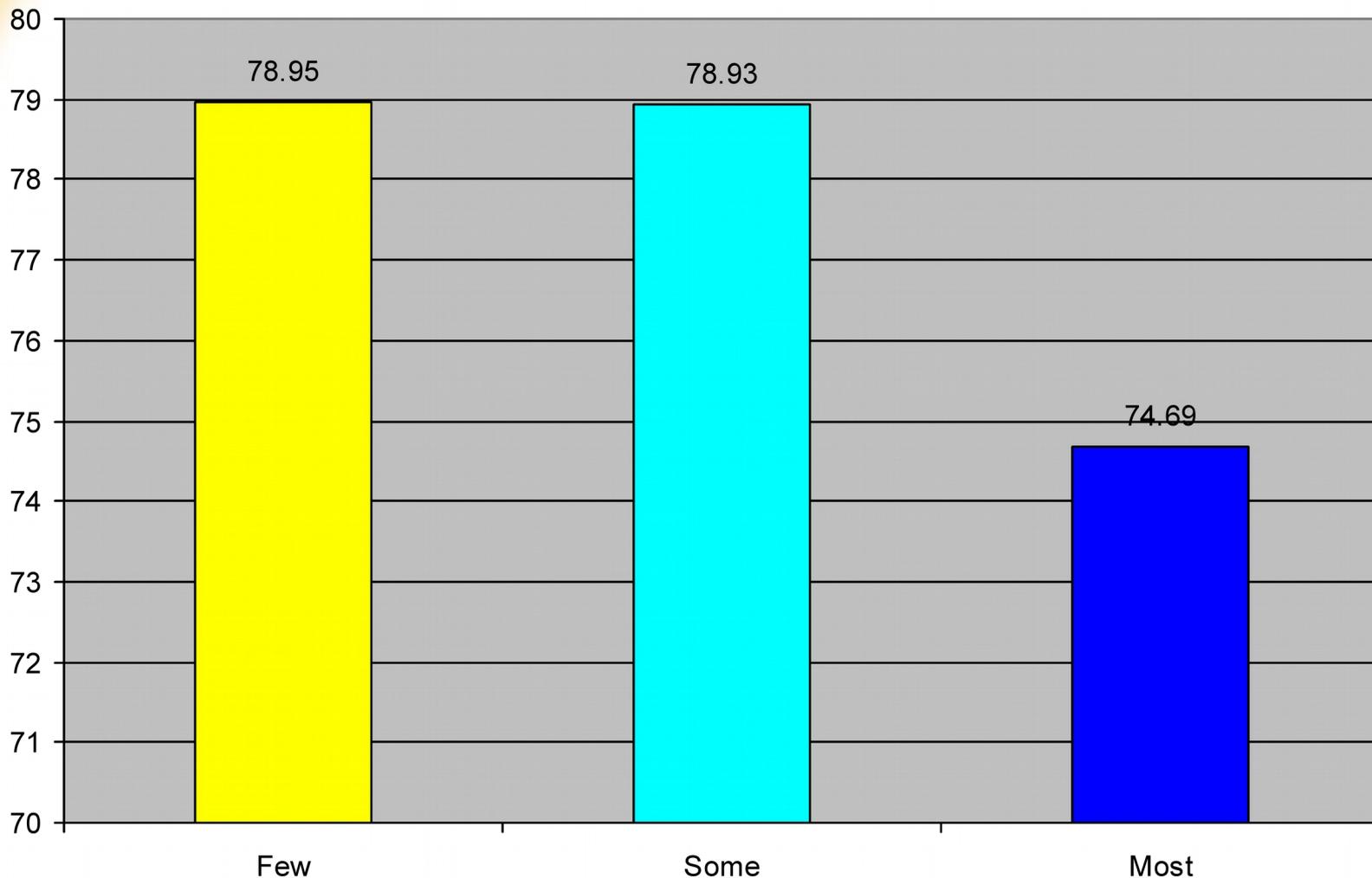
- 'Success Series' dealing with the most commonly requested topics
  - Students were encouraged to attend all sessions throughout the semester but attendance was strictly voluntary
  - I looked at entry characteristics of students and the number of sessions they chose to attend
    - Few (1/3 or less),
    - Some (1/3 – 2/3), or
    - Most (more than 2/3)



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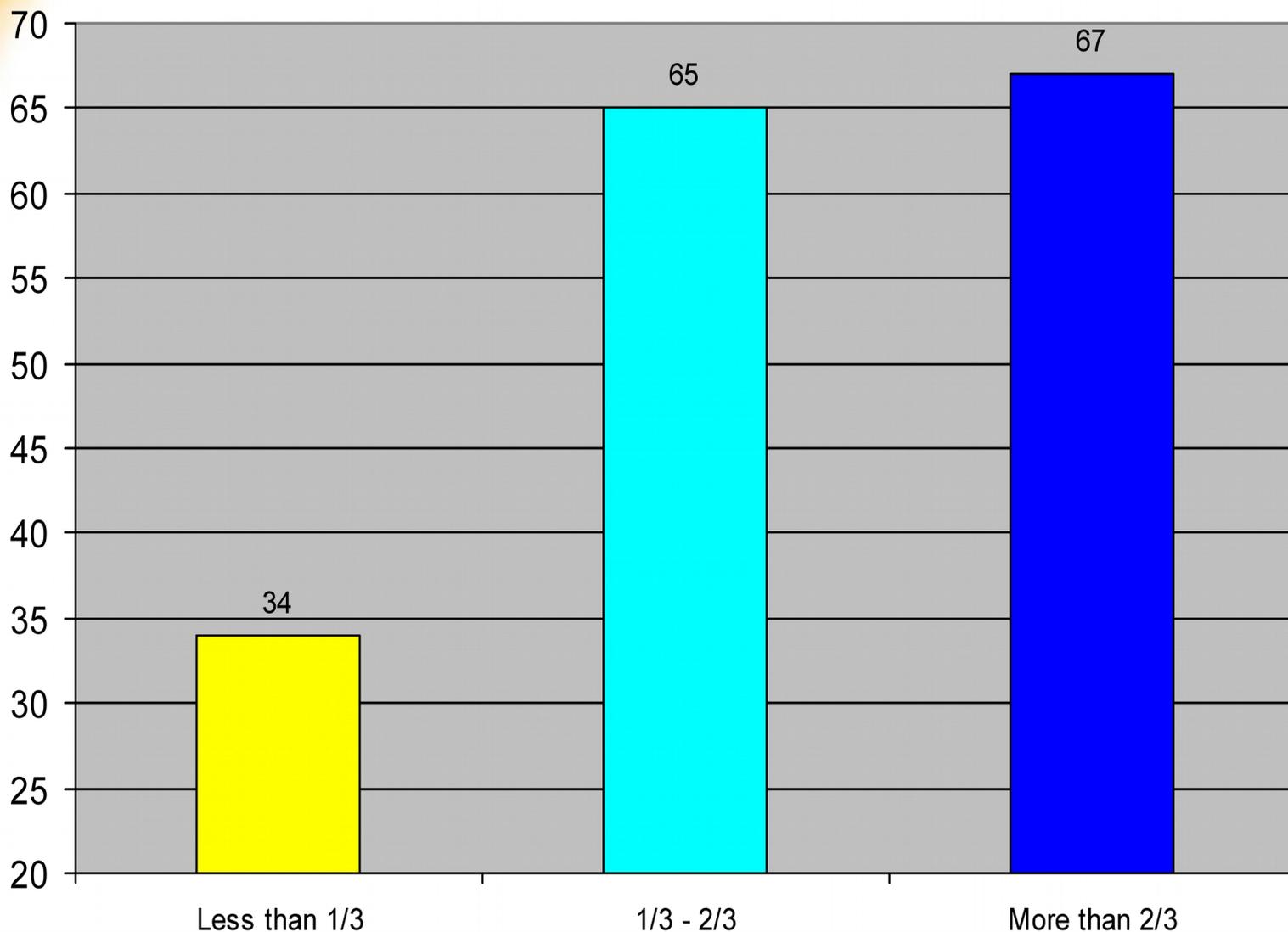
# High School Average by Workshop Attendance





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# "At-risk" Status by Workshop Attendance





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# Attrition Rates by Workshop Attendance

- Attrition into 2<sup>nd</sup> year dropped as workshop attendance increased, shown by the striped lines in the following graph
  - 32% for those who attended 1/3 or fewer workshops in a series
  - 26% in the 1/3 to 2/3 group
  - 20% in the more than 2/3 group



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# Attrition Rates by Workshop Attendance

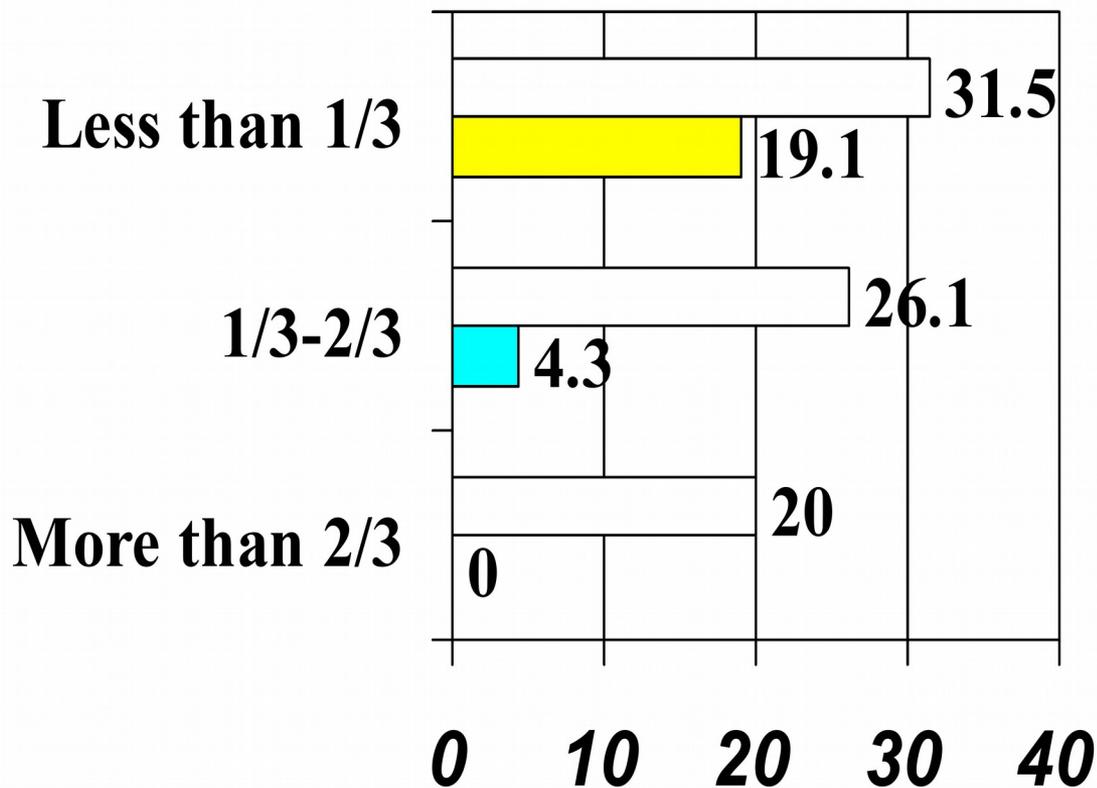
- Then I looked at the academic performance of the students at the time they “left”, as many of our students plan on coming to BU for 1-2 years and then transferring especially for professional programs
- The solid lines on the following graph indicate the proportion of students who left, or were asked to leave, due to academic performance issues (GPA < 2.0)
  - 19% for those who attended Few workshops
  - 4% for those who attended Some
  - 0 for those who attended Most



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# Attrition Rates by Workshop Attendance



**■ Due to Academic Performance □ Into 2nd year**



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# Effective Transitional or Success Courses

- Developmental courses
  - based on sound cognitive theory
  - use a variety of teaching techniques
  - integrate classroom and laboratory or tutorial instruction
  - emphasize critical thinking
- Learning to Learn courses
  - Combination of theory, research and application of learning strategies
  - Result in significant changes in students' self-reports of learning strategies, and small changes in GPA
- Learning Framework courses
  - Theory and research in cognitive and behavioural psychology rooted within the core of the course
  - Demonstrated higher GPAs and retention (Weinstein; Hodges, Dochen & Sellers)



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# Success or Transitional Course

- Fundamentals of Inquiry started in 2005 to address academic preparation as well as integration into the greater academic community
- Counts as an elective toward degree completion
- An interdisciplinary course designed to emphasize skills that transfer broadly across disciplines
  - Grounded in both cognitive psychology and critical thinking



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# Peer Mentor Tutorials

- First year learning communities can assist with both social and academic integration, which in turn increase satisfaction and persistence rates (Kuh)
- The more students are involved in shared learning experiences, the more likely they are to be active participants in their own learning and have a better attitude towards learning (Tinto)
- Students in collaborative learning approaches are more likely to engage in elaboration, comprehension monitoring and critical thinking (Pascarella & Terenzini)



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- “In a *learning* community ... members help each other learn to join the academic community by supporting each other through listening, disagreeing, and working together, students build academic skills and explore ideas in ways that value individual knowledge.”

(James, Bruch & Jehangir 2006:11)



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- Peer cooperative learning programs that specifically embed learning strategy practice or active learning methods into academic content have been shown to more effective than collaborative learning that simply increase interaction
  - but they are more demanding of institutional resources
- The Fundamentals of Inquiry “Success Course” was the most resource dependent model of learning skills delivery



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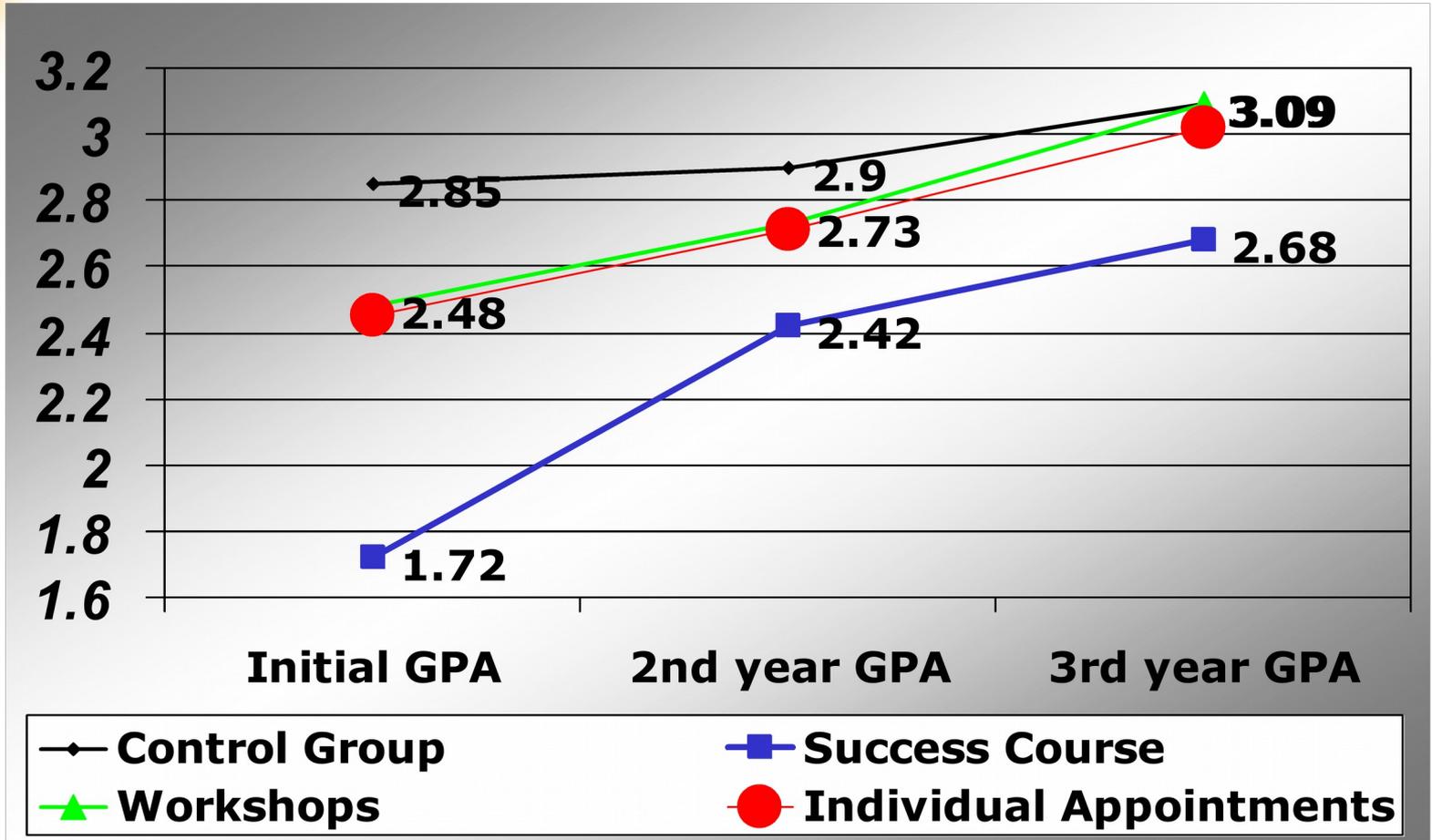
- Examined grades and retention
- No significant difference in GPAs from first to third year for the control group (black line)
  - Remember, these intro psychology students had units in memory strategies and information processing
- Workshop and Appointment categories almost identical
  - Significant increase from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year
  - No difference between these students and control group in either 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year
- Success course students had a much lower initial GPA and were still significantly lower by 3<sup>rd</sup> year (blue line)
  - Significant increase from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year
  - The students who might be expected to perform poorly based on personal or situational entry characteristics moved from a D/C- average to the C/C+ range the following year



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# Difference in GPA Between Classes





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# Difference in GPA by Status

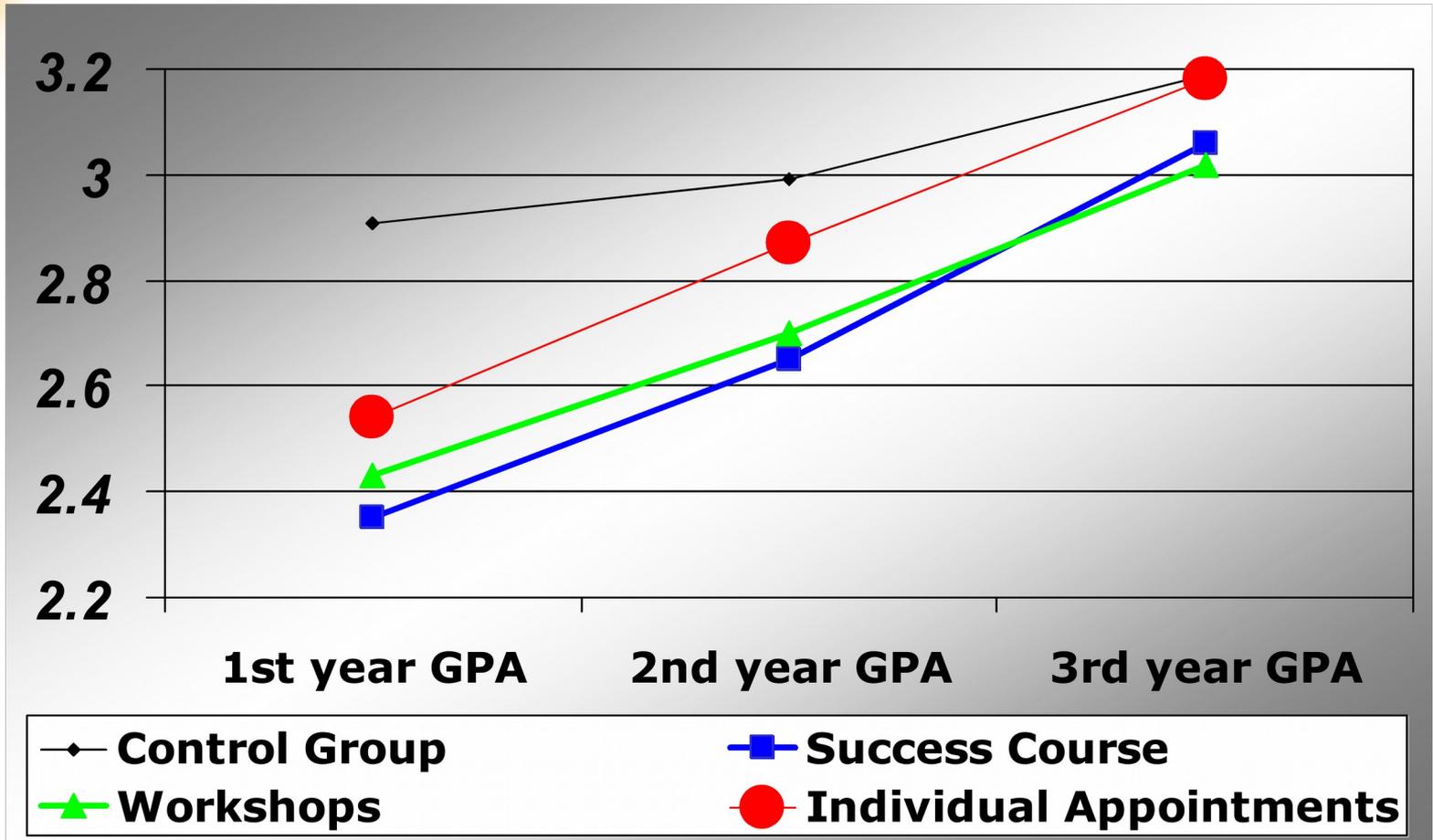
- When examining for changes in academic performance over time by student status, some interesting trends can be noted.
- For traditional students
  - No significant change in GPA for the Control Group of intro psych students (black line)
  - Steady increase in grades from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year across all forms of Learning Skills assistance
  - All groups equivalent by 3<sup>rd</sup> year
    - All forms or models of Learning Skills assistance are effective for Traditional FY students, as measured by grades



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# Difference in GPA Traditional Students





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# Difference in GPA by Status

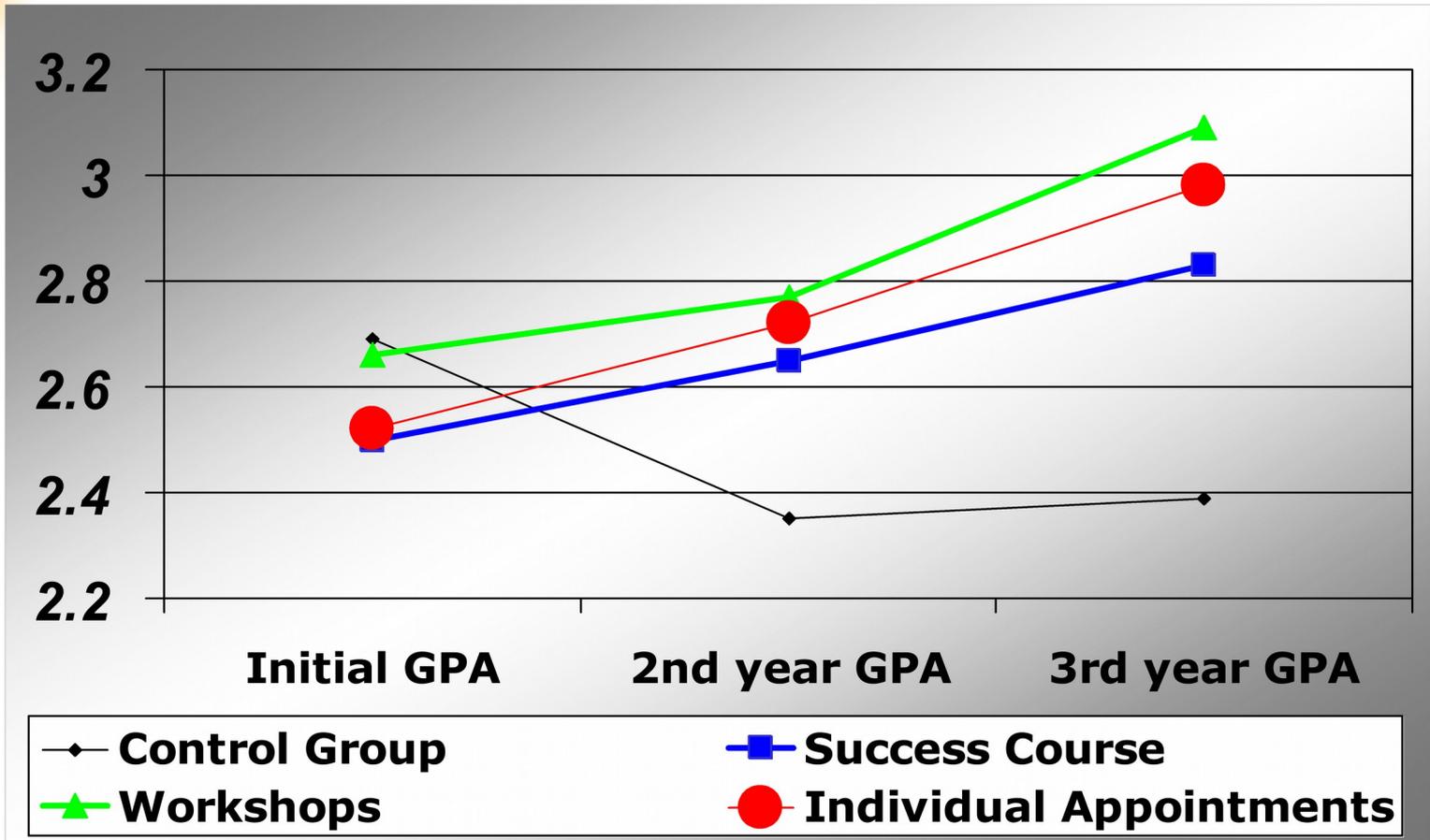
- For Non-traditional students
  - Significant decrease in GPA for the Control Group (black line)
  - All groups equivalent in 1<sup>st</sup> year
  - Significant increase in grades from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year across all forms of Learning Skills assistance
    - All models of Learning Skills assistance are effective for Non-traditional FY students in terms of grades

# Difference in GPA Non-Traditional Students



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# For students on Probation (with first semester GPA < 2.0)

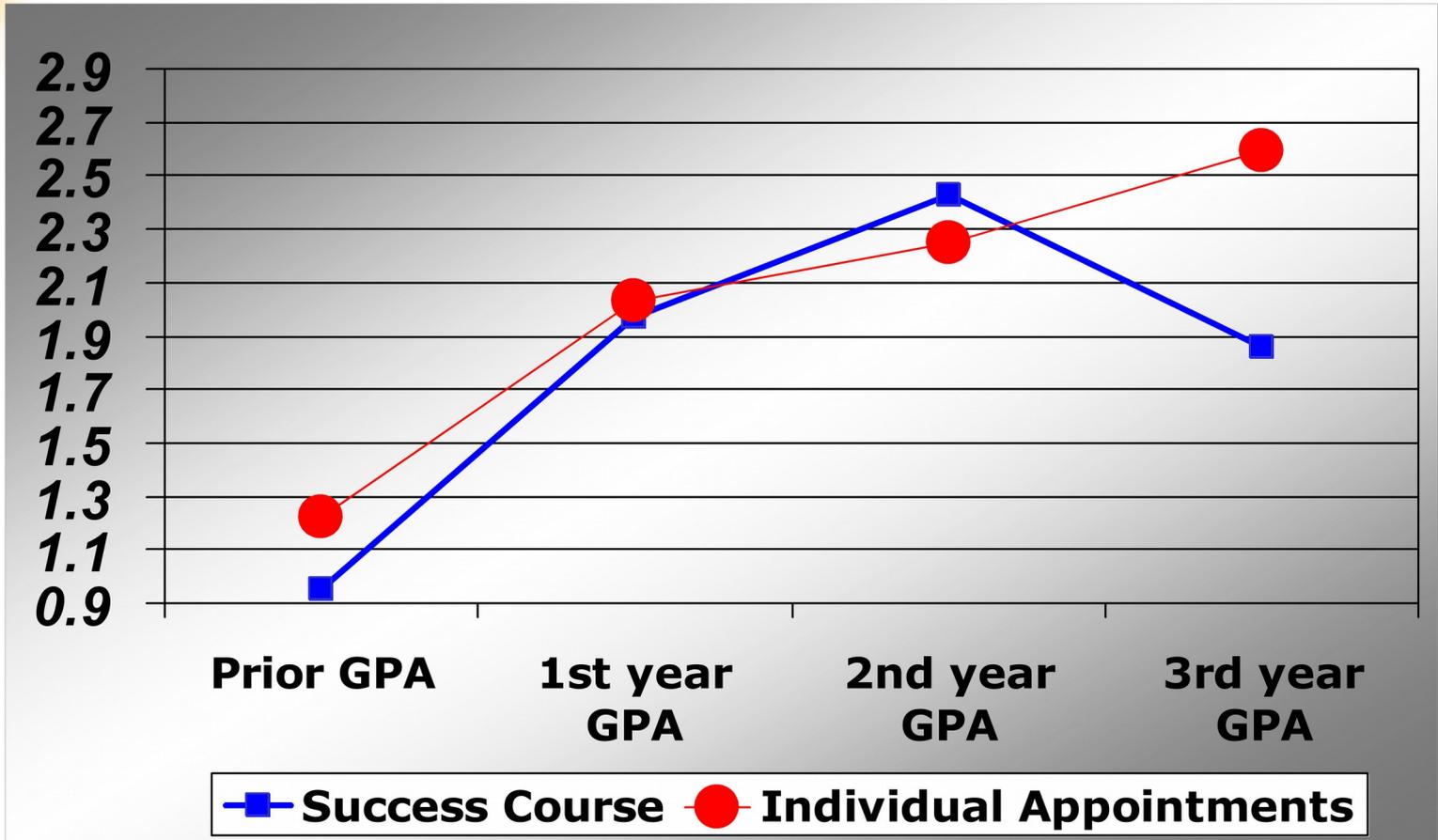
- Insufficient numbers in either Control Group or Workshops!!
- Examined first semester or prior GPA as well
- Significant increase for Appointment group for
  - Prior GPA to 1<sup>st</sup> year GPA (1.22 to 2.03)
  - 1<sup>st</sup> year GPA to 2<sup>nd</sup> year GPA (2.03 to 2.59)
- Significant increase for Success Course group for
  - Prior GPA to 1<sup>st</sup> year GPA (0.95 to 1.97) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year GPA (0.95 to 2.43)
  - Decrease in 3<sup>rd</sup> year GPA but too much variability to produce a statistically significant difference
- Significant difference between the 2 groups on 3<sup>rd</sup> year GPA
- Perhaps these students need the ongoing support received by the students using individual appointments



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# Difference in GPA Students on Probation





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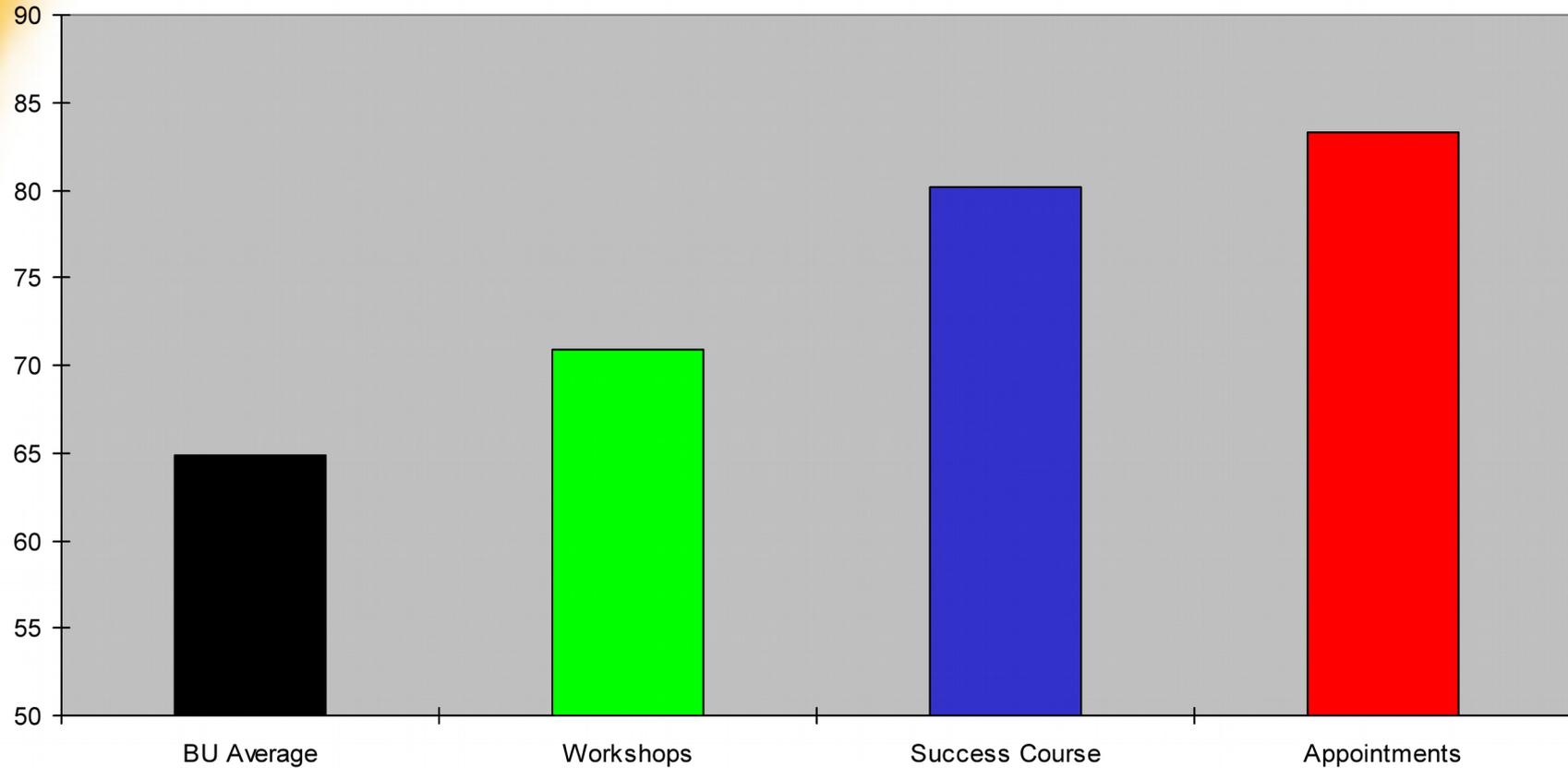
# Retention Rates by Group

- Significant differences in 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention
  - Institutional average (65%) is less than the Workshop group (71%) which is less than the other Learning Skills models
  - Success course (80%) is equivalent to the Individual Appointment group (83%)



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# Retention Rates into 2<sup>nd</sup> year





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# Retention Rates by Status

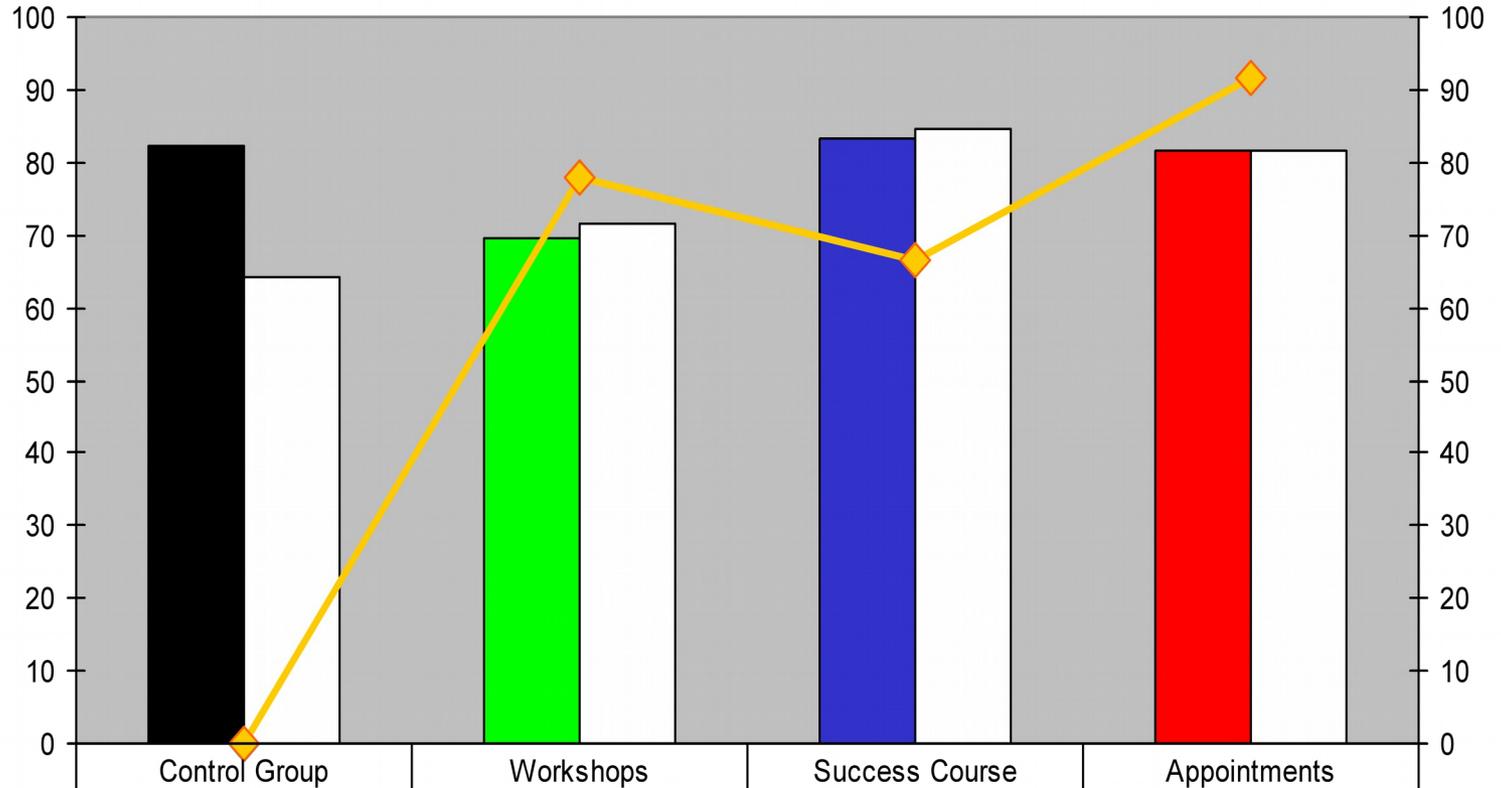
- For students attending Workshops (green on following graph)
  - No differences in retention across status (69-78%)
- Higher overall rates by those using Individual Appointments (red on graph)
  - No differences across status (82-92%)
- Retention highest in Success Course for those students NOT already on probation (83-85% compared with only 67%)



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# Retention Rates by Status



	Control Group	Workshops	Success Course	Appointments
Traditional Students	82.4	69.4	83.3	81.7
Non-traditional	64.3	71.7	84.6	81.7
Probation	0	77.8	66.7	91.5



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- Traditional students
  - Retention was lowest in Workshop category at 69%, compared to 82-83% for the other groups
  - This is confounded by the issue of attendance
- Non-traditional students
  - Ranged from a low of 64% with the Control group to 85% with the Success course
- Students on Probation
  - Ranged from a low of 0 in the Control group to 92% with Individual Appointments
  - Significant differences when comparing only the 3 Learning skills models
    - Success course and Workshops equivalent and lower than Individual Appointments



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# Retention – Credit Hours

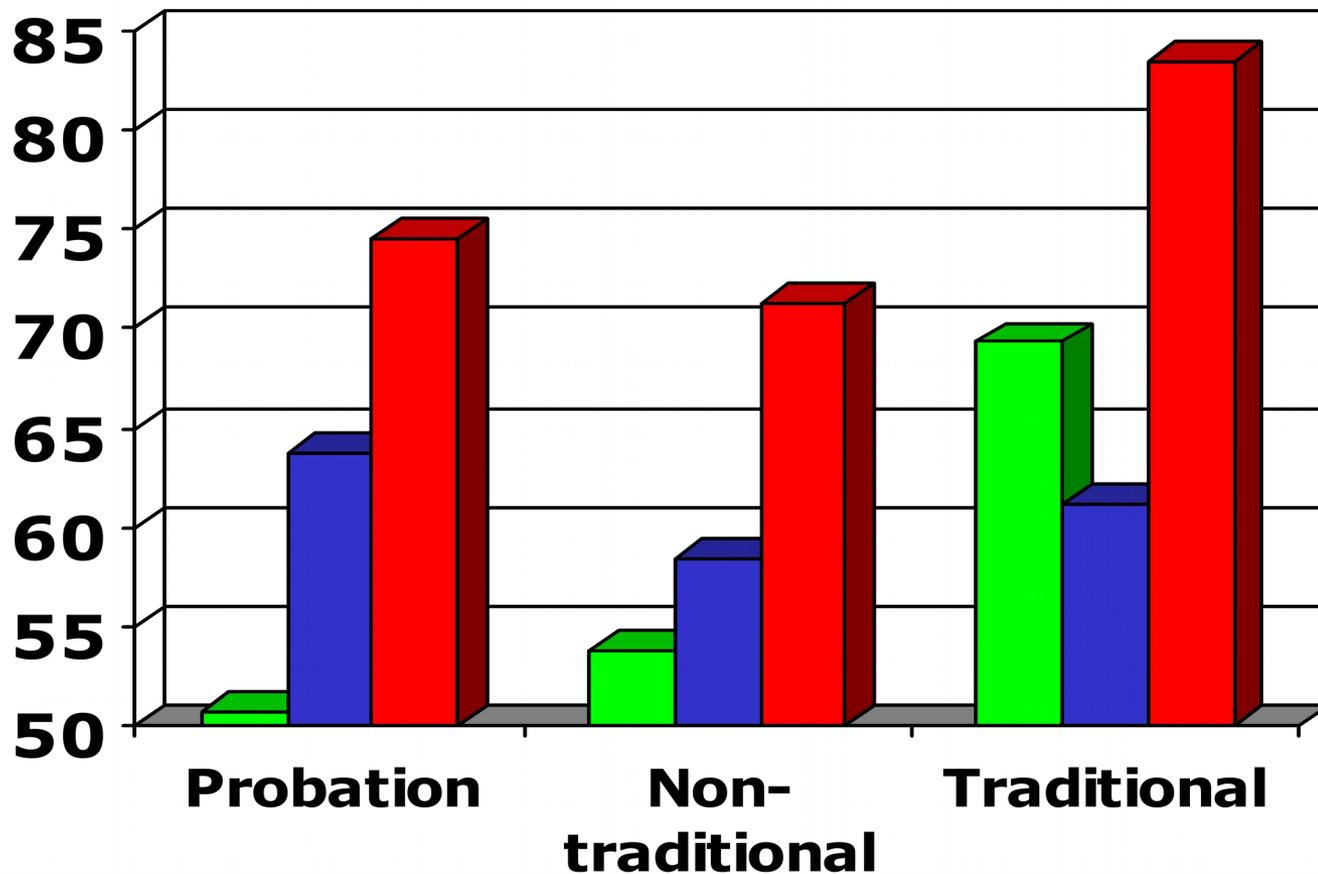
- Another way of looking at retention is to examine the number of credit hours attempted by students
- Students using Individual Appointments take more courses over the length of their studies, in all status categories



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# Retention – Credit Hours



- Workshop**
- Success Course**
- Appointments**



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# Summary

- Control Group
  - No changes in grades from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> year for traditional students
  - Non-traditional students grades decreased significantly
- All forms of learning skills assistance resulted in higher retention than the institutional average
- Significant differences between the 3 delivery models for retention into second year
  - Individual appointments resulted in higher overall retention rates, and higher total credit hours attempted
  - Workshops a cost-effective model when students attend multiple sessions



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# Summary

- These differences are even more noticeable when you take into account student status
  - Traditional students do well in all delivery models
    - Both retention and grades over time indicate success
  - Non-traditional students
    - Higher retention rate after the Success Course
    - Higher rate of improvement for grades with the Success Course but all grades equivalent by 3<sup>rd</sup> year
  - Students on probation
    - May not be best served with a course model – decrease in grades in 3<sup>rd</sup> year
    - Higher retention rate with Individual Appointments (92%!)



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# Questions?

- Please contact me:

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